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## The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West

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*The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West*, by Michael L. Tate. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. xx, 454 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

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Michael Tate argues that the public's conception of the U.S. Army's role in frontier American history is a false one, shaped by John Ford, John Wayne, and Kevin Costner rather than the historical record. Echoing Francis Paul Prucha's studies of army activities east of the Mississippi River, Tate traces the army's role as the "right arm" of the federal government and executor of its "nineteenth-century expansionist policies" in the trans-Mississippi West (x). Here was a "multipurpose" army far more occupied with exploration, mapping, road building, fort construction, vegetable gardening, and aiding westward bound emigrants than in suppressing Native Americans.

Tate synthesizes a wide range of published primary and secondary sources, presenting his material in topical chapters to demonstrate the diverse activities of the multipurpose frontier army. He observes that military activity on the nineteenth-century western frontier modifies the national myth that hardy pioneers brought "civilization to the untamed frontier" by dint of hard work and individual courage. Few question the fortitude or suffering of the pioneers, but Tate urges us to recognize that virtually everywhere emigrants went, soldiers had already been there and more often than not gave them vital assistance in the long journey from Missouri to the Pacific Coast and points in between. Lay people may know of the role played by army explorers such as Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, and John C. Frémont in exploring the trans-Mississippi West. Few, however, realize that frontier soldiers built roads and bridges, provided emergency food and medical aid, and served as law enforcers along the emigrant trails.

Tate stresses the crucial role the army and its soldiers played in the development as well as the settlement of the West. Army payrolls and government contracts underwrote the economic origins of many western towns and cities. Moreover, he demonstrates that individual soldiers, largely officers, contributed to western economic growth and development through their entrepreneurial and investment activities.

After 1865, the army sometimes served as a relief agency when disasters such as droughts, prairie and forest fires, epidemics, and earthquakes occurred. Additionally, the army originated government activities that were later taken over by the National Weather Bureau (est. 1890) and the National Park Service (est. 1916). For much of the nineteenth century, post commanders recorded daily meteorological

observations, and from the late 1860s, Signal Corps telegraphers reported local weather conditions to Washington. Army cavalry units began patrolling Yellowstone National Park in the mid-1880s and later performed similar duty at Yosemite, Sequoia, and Grant Parks in California.

Tate depicts the frontier army accomplishing "a wide range of tangible accomplishments" in an era of limited governmental action. Although most Americans were either hostile or indifferent to the armed services, westerners welcomed the most evident presence of the federal government in the region, the U.S. Army. Many, Tate concludes, saw it as the "primary medium" that brought American culture and political institutions to the West. His synthesis of the extant published literature on the army in the West makes a convincing case for that view.

Tate locates the western frontier west of the 97th meridian. Although he mentions military road building in Iowa in the early 1840s, there is little here on the Middle West or the first tier of states and territories west of the Mississippi. Tate underplays the functions the frontier army already played in the late 1780s and 1790s as a multi-purpose force furthering migration and settlement well before expansion moved west of the Mississippi. The author is aware of that role, but a brief introductory chapter reviewing those precedents would more firmly demonstrate continuity in the army's history.

In many instances Tate's broader topics are familiar to those who are well read in the army's history. His book is nonetheless an important one. His bibliography is the most complete one on the multi-purpose army. In some instances, he examines rarely explored areas, notably the personal economic activities of soldiers and the role of retired soldiers in western community life. Most importantly, he successfully refutes the myth of a frontier army occupied solely with Indian fighting. He demonstrates as well that the exploration, settlement, and development of the trans-Mississippi West were fostered by the national government, through the agency of the U.S. Army. In the current political climate where it is almost *de rigueur* to brand the federal government as an inhibitor of personal freedom and economic development, it is valuable to be reminded that the nation was built both by individual effort and by the collective action of the federal government.

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